Notes on Essay Writing: Format, References and Bibliography

Introduction These notes are presented for general use to show the formal standards expected in your essays. Some of the comments and advice may seem elementary, but if you do not know basic principles, these notes should help. Also, now that all essays and dissertations are uploaded to Turnitin, please ensure that you are using compatible software – most students use Word, which is fine. Feedback will be provided for all your work, both as comments on the text in text boxes, and as more considered comments on the sidebar. Please ensure that you read all your feedback; much of it relates to the content of the essay, of course, but some of it will be about formal presentation and layout too. Scholarly work has to be presented in the proper way and you will lose marks if you don’t pay attention to the guidelines set out below. If an essay is not double-spaced, for example, the marker might assume that the rest of the work lacks detail and care as well. If you have good ideas, it makes sense to present them in the best possible way and with pride and care.

1. Spacing, Layout and Title Please use double spacing and leave wide margins (at least 1 1/2 in. or 40 mm.) on the left and right edges of the page and at the top and bottom. A dense page of text prevents us from reading and correcting, even on Turnitin. Do remember to give a title to your essay; and make sure it is at the top of the essay itself. Don’t use your name: the system is supposed to be anonymous.

2. Word Limits If a word limit is set, please observe it. The purpose of word limits is to accustom you to writing concisely and to the point to an agreed format, and to ensure parity across a module. For assessed work, the word limit should be observed strictly.

3. How and when to use quotations Whenever you use a quotation in your essay, ask yourself whether you really need it. Can you say it just as well in
your own words? Or does it say something in a particularly useful way? Does it support your point? Avoid posturing and padding by citing what you perceive to be ‘authority’ and ask yourself whether you understand the critic or scholar you are quoting, and whether you think s/he is right or not. If, after all this, you decide you do need the quotation, then use it, BUT

- **Comment on it and analyse it**, don’t assume that it speaks for itself but evaluate what the quotation adds to what you want to say in the essay.

- Make sure, also, that you **give enough context for a quotation**, by introducing it with a short sentence or phrase and by mentioning the author’s name: ‘Brian Lee suggests with regard to *The Great Gatsby* for example that ‘...’; or ‘In this section of the novel, Dick is still seen by Rosemary as the ideal man: ‘...’

- **Avoid the use of very short quotations**, such as half a sentence or only a phrase— they are not informative or distinctive enough to help you to make your point.

- Make clear which part of your text is quotation by using **single inverted commas** at the beginning and end of your quotation, ‘like this’, and use double quotation marks “like these” for quotations within quotations, for example: ‘John told me “I really don’t care” and put the phone down.’

- Quotations of more than 40 words should be ‘blocked off’, i.e. indented (set in) from both the left-hand and right-hand margins and typed in single spacing, like this:

  Such indented quotations should *not* have quotation-marks; nor should they be embellished with italics. Setting quotations as indented passages makes a writer think whether the original wording needs to be repeated. Again, always ask yourself whether you really need a quotation—quoting too much can be a way of avoiding arguing for yourself.

- Lastly, **Avoid Citing the OED for Definitions**. It is strangely common for students to do this and it always annoys markers. Try to be more inventive if you are considering the properties of a word or a term or a concept, especially now online definitions are so ubiquitous.
4. Referencing Everything you quote from a primary or secondary source (books or articles you have read to prepare your essay) should be acknowledged (referenced). You can do this with foot- or endnotes, or simply in brackets at the end of the quotation, or at the end of the sentence in which it occurs. Whichever system you use, footnotes, endnotes, or brackets, stick to it throughout your essay—don’t mix them up.

- If you choose the short form of referencing, where you give the source at the end of your sentence or quotation rather than in a foot- or endnote, then you should include author’s name, year of publication (of the edition you have used, which will be in your bibliography at the end) and the page number from which the quotation is taken: (Steinbeck 1995: 28).

- If you to use foot- or endnotes, the reference should include author’s name, title of the text, and page number, like this: ¹

If you are not quoting directly, but you are borrowing an idea from a secondary source or you are paraphrasing in some detail from a primary one, this should also be acknowledged. For example if you say: ‘some critics have stated that The Great Gatsby critiques the American Dream...’ then you should give references to those critics (Lee 1993: 86; King 1975:162). If you don’t do this, you could be accused of derivative work or, at worst, plagiarism.

- Don’t exaggerate it, however; you don’t have to acknowledge ‘seminar notes’ nor do you have to refer to everything you have read in the course of preparing your essay. But ask yourself continually when you are writing your essay: did I read this somewhere? If the answer is ‘yes’, consult your notes and find the appropriate reference; if on the other hand you feel that what you say is or has become your idea, or it is a commonplace observation, then you don’t have to worry about acknowledgement.

So, every time you quote someone else’s words or you borrow someone else’s idea, you MUST provide a reference to the original words. If you don’t do this, you could be accused of plagiarism (passing off someone else’s work as your own) which the University regards as a very serious offence against academic

¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath p.28.
discipline. Remember also, that it is now very easy for your tutors to use special search engines that will detect plagiarising from the Internet as well as printed sources—don’t do it, it really is not worth it.

5. Documentation The main principles for referencing are clarity, concision and consistency. The crucial distinction is between a) references to books, and b) references to articles and essays in books and periodicals/journals/online journals. You are unlikely to get a particular convention exactly right and achieve consistency without much practice. So don’t despair - but do begin to implement these principles as soon as possible.

- **Other works that are generally italicized** include films, television shows, plays, scientific species names, paintings and works of art. Shorter works that get quotation marks include chapter titles, television episode titles, chapter titles, short poems and short stories.

- You use the **long form** of a reference (complete with book title, place of publication, publisher and year of publication) only when you use this reference for the first time in a foot-or endnote. Later notes can refer to the same book or article in **short form** simply as Dangerfield, *In Defense of the Senate* p.20; or Eliot, 'The Waste Land’ p.39.
- You can also use phrases such as op.cit. (Latin *opere citato*, meaning ‘the work just cited’) or ibid. (Latin *ibidem* ‘in the same place’) for references which have
already been given in an earlier foot- or endnote. For example, if note 10 says Dangerfield, *In Defense of the Senate* p.121 and note 11 refers to the same work, but a different page, then note 11 can read: op.cit. p.133. If note 12 then refers also to page 133 of Dangerfield, it can simply read: ibid.


- **ALWAYS** give a **page number** when you give a reference for a quotation; without it, the reference is useless (because the reader won’t be able to find where your quotation came from).

- These rules apply to online material too. Often on JStor and other academic packages, the webpage for the article will show how to cite the reference for the essay you are using. Sometimes, though, internet material is not paginated, which can be expressed as (*np*). Beware of using this too much. Are you using really authoritative sources?
5. Bibliography

This should do two things: one is to gather together in alphabetical order by author’s name the works cited (surname followed by first names/initials); and, secondly, list other material used in the writing of your essay.

The bibliography should come at the end of your essay, preferably on a separate sheet. It should be arranged in alphabetical order of the author’s surname. In any alphabetical listing, give the (first) author's surname first, followed by given names/initials. Thus the books cited above would be listed as:


You should stick to the following format:


If there is more than one work by the same author, organise the entries alphabetically by the title of the publication or chronologically, by the date of (original) publication in square brackets []:


6. **Writing your essay** Essay writing is hard work, and you only get better at it by doing it and by learning from your mistakes. Here are some common ones:

- the use of the 's (**apostrophe s**) and s (**possessive or genitive s**): its=of it ('the cat chased its tail') it's=it is ('it's a hard life'). When in doubt ask yourself whether you are shortening from 'it is' or not. In any case, the shortened form is not good practice in written language ('I should not have done that', would be better than 'I shouldn't have done that'; 'It is a hard life' better than 'It's a hard life').

- the **plural s** can also be a problem: Americans= more than one American, but Americans'= of the Americans ('Americans' image abroad tends to be filtered through the media').

- But, when the word ends in a **vowel**, you do need an apostrophe even in the singular: America's destiny= the destiny of America; Joe's self-perception=the self-perception of Joe; Joe Smith and Joe Brown make two Joes; hence ...the two Joes' self-perception...

When **writing about literature**, the most important rule is to write about it in **the present tense**, because literature, as an art form, has no past, no history. To us, as readers, it is always present. When you write about fiction in the past tense, it sounds naive, as if you assume these people are real. **Writing about history** can be undertaken in the same way – the present historic, as it is called, is very popular with media historians: “The Romans arrive in 54 BCE,” etc – but it is equally acceptable to write about history in the past tense, for obvious reasons.

**Punctuation** exists to **clarify** your writing and to give it a **rhythm for ease of reading**. It is generally better to aim for relatively short sentences, by being more **straightforward** and keeping it **simple**. There are good books on essay writing in the library.

**Structure** your essay in a logical way. You can do this with the **conventional order** of introduction-argument-conclusion/summary of argument. The introduction is of crucial importance, since this is where you state what the central problem/question of your essay is and how you are going to go
about answering or exploring it. Ultimately this is what your essay will be judged by: whether you succeed in doing what you say you are going to do.

- Always make sure your **paragraphs** bear a clear relation to each other, by linking them explicitly. You can do this in several ways: 'having explored the reasons why .....we can now turn our attention to...' or 'Two aspects need to be discussed in this context. The first is.... Secondly...' and so on. This is called **signposting**, because phrases such as these guide the reader through your argument. If you find this too boring, then adopt a less explicit mode of signposting: 'We can usefully compare Eliot’s use of the tradition [which you have just discussed] with H.D.’s....[your next point]'; or you can say simply 'By contrast, .....' or 'What follows from this is...'

- **Ensure that paragraphs are not too long.** Don’t allow a paragraph to take up a whole page, or even three quarters of a page. Stick to the rule that one paragraph should contain one main point. If you want to develop that point, use further paragraphs.

Nothing helps as much in learning to write well as looking at writers whom you admire. In a very concrete sense then, **good writing depends on good reading** (of other people’s work, and your own). But here are some tips:

- **Use full sentences,** which means: sentences including an active verb in the main part. 'Thus proving she is right' is not a full sentence, because 'Thus proving' belongs to a statement made in the preceding sentence. 'In doing this, she proves she is right' is a proper sentence, because the main statement here is active: 'she proves'.

- **It is not forbidden to use ‘I’** in an academic essay, but neither is it good form to do so constantly. The ‘I’ should be used when you are stating your intention, giving an opinion, or when you want to pose a question (preferably not a rhetorical one). Whenever you are conveying knowledge (whether common or specialist) avoid ‘I’, and write objectively.

- Try and **avoid the passive voice** (‘It can thus be seen that ...’) and use active verbs instead—it makes your writing more lively: ‘We can see that...’ is more direct. But perhaps you don’t need phrases such as these at all; perhaps you
only need what you would say after ‘it can thus be seen that’: ‘...in Invisible Man Ellison presents a social history of African-Americans.’

- Other things to avoid are: generalisations of most kinds (be strict with yourself about whether you are conveying information or merely warming up, and whether you really know what you are talking about; vagueness (like ‘of most kinds’, or ‘in various ways’, which carries no informational content at all, it just suggests that it does); moral judgements (it is not our job, as scholars, to judge but to understand); and existential statements (‘We all know that life presents us with challenges, and that they are there to be overcome’—but pronouncing on the meaning of life is not what academic essays are for ).

- Be as precise and specific as you can; work from what you know or find useful in other people’s work, and do not feel that somehow everything you say has to be couched in very complicated language. Part of what you learn at University is how to use a professional vocabulary, but don’t overdo it: clarity, always, is key.

- Use gender-neutral language, whatever material you are dealing with. When you mean ‘men’ say ‘men’, when you mean ‘men and women’ use ‘people’; when you mean ‘humankind’ use that, not ‘man’ or ‘mankind’. Other forms you can use are s/he (instead of ‘he’ as a universal pronoun), but most people like to avoid this awkwardness altogether and use the plural form: ‘they’.

And finally: edit your work before you submit it. A fresh eye (your own after a few days’ break or someone else’s) can do wonders for your writing, because whilst you are writing your essay or straight after you often cannot see your own mistakes or confusions. This requires a bit of planning, but once you get used to including the editing stage in your essay writing schedule, you will see that your work will really benefit from it.

Other Guides and Style Manuals The most useful guide for beginners is Kate L Turabian, Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations, 6th ed., rev. (Chicago, 1996); while a somewhat more professionally-directed work is A S Maney & R L Smallwood, Style Book: Notes for Authors, Editors and Writers of Theses, 5th ed., rev. (London, 1996). Both these works are available in British paperbacks. In the USA and for American readers, the standard tends to be set
by The Chicago Manual of Style: for Authors, Editors and Copywriters, 14th ed., rev. (Chicago, 1993). This work too is currently available in the UK. A very good way of learning-by-doing is to choose a scholarly text and use this as a model.

The library now has an on-line tutorial in which you can learn and practice your referencing skills. The address is

http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/infosuss

On this site you will also be able to learn how to use electronic resources (on-line journals and websites); how to find and evaluate information on the Internet, and how to use reading lists. Of course, the site is linked to the Library catalogue, and it teaches you how to use the catalogue effectively. Have a go at some of the exercises: here you have all the tools you need to research and write and present your essays in an appropriate academic style in one place, and at your fingertips!
7. Plagiarism